

Fruit Box Castles

Too young to understand ranching
I was the observer with a head full of questions
getting in the way as mom pulled on her waders,
sloshed down the muddy rows
shoveling open the checks gridding
the orchard in dirt geometry.

Summers we slept on cots unfolded in screened porches;
the hum of the water pump switching
on and off lulled us to sleep.
Told never play on the plywood planking the well
or meet the calico's fate fished up
in the net, a wet mop of meows.
July meant fruit box castles,
children's' architectural wonders
prodding the gates of heaven.
When the limbs dropped toward the earth heavy with fruit
Mom braced them with wooden props of v's.
culled the smallest for canning and peach pies.

The crew came to harvest in a cloud of cinnamon dust.
Sunburned faces peeked out from checkered bandanas
beneath straw hats, magicians' hands filled canvas sacks
thirty pounds bowed their backs and once an infant
in a smaller sack nursed a mother in our walnut's shade.

Mom counted boxes. Dad drove the tractor towed the flatbed
to men with biceps like the trunks of oak trees
stacking boxes on pallets. Afterwards the orchard looked
roughed up as if there'd been theft or violation.